

# *The Forsaken*

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# *Prologue*

The attack was the gathered retaliation of the lesser-dragons; the insensitive military strikes upon their lairs had provoked them. The military wanted them out, not necessarily dead. The dragons were confronted within their own lairs and slain; numerous brood cut down, pierced by lance and sword. There were too many over-ambunctious foot soldiers and Knights plunging far into the extreme, ignoring orders.

Two of the of the King's sixteen military legions were lost in the raids. It was written that the men who died perished so that many could live, free of the terror the monsters inflicted. Many of the commoners saw it merely as an excuse to kill the dragons. Lust for blood, power, and increase in personal wealth dominated the King's heart. The evidence of truth in this lay in past history.

It was a time of great anxiety for the people of the City-Port, Navan. They became greatly disturbed, sending in petitions in favor of the dragons, afraid that the killing would cause the creatures to retaliate against the city; they wanted them left alone. Everyone knew dragons had dangerously high intellect. These petitions had come about due to three incidents which had occurred far outside the city walls. The first two dragon encounters, in which children were the victims, were promptly ignored by the governor. The third involved the Governor's own son, who was badly injured by fire. Then, and only then, was action taken against the great fire-breathers.

In the beginning the people wanted blood for blood against the very dragon that took the lives of their children. It was a cold hard fact that a dragon, once it shed blood, did not stop. The scent of man would then hurl it into a killing frenzy.

Witnesses had testified of only a single dragon responsible for the attacks. But their witnesses were dismissed by the self righteous governor, thus legion after legion of the King's Knights were dispatched to slay every dragon within a hundred leagues. Ironic it was, that in the midst of the King's design to solemnly bring the dragons to justice, for the people, grand celebrations were launched within the castle walls after each hunt (dragon skins hanging by great hooks, secured to great oaken timbers,

worked into large racks, were the evidence that more than motive drove the killings).

Each skin was sold for no small sum of gold. Once the first dragon hide was purchased it became a crazed mercantile exchange, yielding incredible profit. The King's Knights were continuously dispatched out from the city by night to "defend the borders".

Among these Knights was a General by the name of Kenneth Bullrammer. It was he who led the first of the King's legions out to battle when it all began. General Bullrammer was opposed to the killings, especially due to the loss of his men with the launching of every dragon campaign. Still, Bullrammer was an oath-bound, blood-sworn, Knight, and did his King's bidding, the honor of his vows to the King and Kingdom outweighing his personal judgements.

And so, time after time, he led his men out, tracking the great beasts in a campaign of death. The hunts usually lasted for three full moons. And, as his liege ordered him, he took down dragon after dragon, at the considerable loss to his men. He himself slew three young dragons single handedly while out in the field, but he did not pride himself on it, even as many of his men congratulated him.

On one hand the struggle raging between beast and mankind sent the uprooted dragons fleeing into the distant mountain ranges. On the other hand it increased the wealth of the King significantly. It seemed like a win-win situation for a very happy, and much wealthier, king.

One day General Bullrammer and his men had tracked one of the beasts to a deep within a distant mountain range. With his men strategically surrounding the valley, he readied his Knights. As soon as all was ready he gave the signal to charge the valley. The thunder of their horses hooves filled the air and echoed throughout the mountains as they stormed the ravines and canyons. Into the heart of the towering peaks they invaded, into the dragons place of retreat. Unbeknownst to all this act would directly provoke the greatest dragon assault against the inhabitants of Navan in all its history (even though the raid was never accomplished). For something happened that day within that valley, something General Kenneth Bullrammer, slayer of three dragons, would never speak of in full . . . not to his men, his family, nor even

to his King.

The thunder of hooves pounded to a stop just inside the valley's entrance. One Knight, a high ranking captain, signaled with a horn to hold position, to await further orders. As the last note died away, the Knight's face grew pale as the horn fell from his lips. Turning to his General, he hoarsely whispered, "General Bullrammer, what-" "I see Captain Beckner, I see!" Retorted General Bullrammer angrily. There were no dragons within the valley. Not one shed dragon scale for evidence. Not one dropping -- nothing.

Signaling his troops to hold ground, he heeled his War-Horse forward to the center of the vale and reined in to a stop. His stallion sauntered nervously sideways as he leaned down from the side of his mount searching with an experienced eye for signs of recent prints. As he looked to the ground, his stallion's eyes suddenly rolled in fear, stomping and throwing its nose up, ears laid back.

Soothing his horse into submission, he continued to search for dragon evidence, leaning down further from the saddle to study the earth. As he did, his horse abruptly reared in terror, throwing him to the earth. Years of training had taught him never to fight against a fall but to let it happen and relax. As soon as he struck the earth, he was back upon his feet, hand quickly grasping the hilt of a broad sword at his side. With a ring of steel, his sword was unsheathed.

Cursing he watched his steed tear away across the grassy plain to vanish over a small rolling hill of green. He briefly marveled at why his mount had lost control; what it feared. In all its life, he had never lost command of it. Over the years he grew to trust its instincts as well as his own; and this is what alarmed him the most.

His men could fire a hail of arrows and bolts down upon any sudden attack that might come upon him, though he could not fathom anything possibly getting through the ranks of his Knights. He trusted the scouts to watch the skies for a possible dragon-strike. Yet, the feeling he sensed was here upon the ground that he now stood. This place was a menace and a threat, not the surrounding mountains, not the sky . . . here.

Each minute seemed to him as ten as he listened to the sounds of the wind

blowing through the tall grasses, of the familiar sounds of shield and sword, lance and armor inadvertently violating the space of each other with the shifting of three-hundred mounts stamping and snorting impatiently. All these were the familiar sounds of which he was accustomed.

Bullrammer looked around, the muscles in his strong stone-like face twitching with anticipation as he searched for some hidden secret which might reveal the nature of his uneasiness. An apprehension began to manifest itself in him, slowly transforming to horror, as he felt unseen icy fingers begin to grope at him.

Within his mind he visualized some men in his recent past, how they had lost their lives upon the battle field as they fell victim to fear. Terror was the enemy, and he frowned at it as it cut at him, as if with a razor-sharp blade. The General shook his head, driving the feeling away with a mind of steel.

Concentrating on the task at hand, he searched on. But even as he did so, his legs began to feel heavy, and his thoughts became jumbled. His boot caught on a protruding rock, causing him to fall to the ground. Again he arose as quickly as he had stumbled. Cursing, he crouched frozen in terror as if an adult dragon was suddenly upon him in its full wrath. He waited for the enemy to fall upon him as his eyes darted this way and that. He searched for any hint of movement in the grass and sky.

With a start, the General straightened to his full height, gasping at what he heard -- or rather what he no longer heard. Stumbling to the top of a grassy mound he looked out at the open plains against the mountains, searching back and forth along the mountains edge, confused and bewildered, not believing his own eyes. Empty. There were the plains of trodden grass as they should have been had an army passed over them. But his legion was gone . . . simply gone!

As if evil itself came in answer to his fear, a cold wind swept through the valley, washing up from behind. With a dry-throated' curse he reeled about, feeling the grasp of something distant, as if something was reaching, grasping for him.

As General Bullrammer peered out into the uncanny frigid blanket of flowing chill, he strained his eyes to see any hint of an enemy. His heart drummed and

throbbled as it had many times within the heat of battle, yet this time it was laced with an icy terror he had never before felt.

Then it came upon him. He beheld, as if it were, a mere black hooded cloak born up into the sudden rise of winds. He passed over it once, thinking it was nothing more than what it seemed to be; debris caught in the currents upon the horizon. Yet, as it neared, his eyes widened, terror pulsating with every beat of his pounding heart. It was more than something caught up by the hands of nature . . . unnatural.

General Kenneth Bullrammer was never one to let something else control him; he being a man of great physical stature and a tempered mind of steel. That is why the King had chosen him as the leader of one of his twelve legions. His men knew him as one they could set their back against in time of need. Yet, never had he encountered something such as this . . . no, never alone that is. And he was alone.

He watched as the cloak, now more clearly visible, floated through the sky, moving swiftly as if upon the currents of a fast flowing river. It was all he could do to keep his breathing steady as it approached, seeming to take on the form of an apparition; some darkened haunt. His heart fluttered dangerously within his chest as the flowing darkness, in the form of obsidian robes, silently lowered before him into the grasses, not quite touching the earth.

As it hovered before him, it spoke in a voice that touched not his mind but his ears in chilling whispers. It's mental voice hissed as if attempting to communicate with him down through a thousand millennia, the words becoming jumbled and faded at times.

“Mine you are within mountains these. Yourself to me give. Try it is useless me to resist, resist, resist.” Earlier in his youth he had associated himself with all manner of folk. He had been a renegade adventurer, leaving his parents and family for weeks, sometimes months on end, to see the world. During these ventures Kenneth had fallen into company with some possessing great power, and they had taught him many things: Magic, tracking, self mastery, fighting, and much more. A good friend and Sorcerer by the name of Merdreth had once warned him to never depend on one's self entirely; it would be a grave mistake. He was counseled to seek

power in the things of all the world as well as magic and self. And so with this knowledge, and much practice and experience over the years, he slowly forged his body, spirit, and mind upon the anvil of control and became his own master. Above all, he trusted himself first, doing all he could do. But never at any time would he rely solely upon himself when another could better his cause. The problem was, he had no time to call upon allies. How could he have known this to be the reason of the absence of every dragon in this valley? No, he was now beset by a creature, the likes of which he had never seen, and he was alone.

His enemy now hovered before him, the likes of which he had never seen. But now the terrible sensations, which had nearly overcome him, began to subside with the instant recollection of his past companions. Their memory gave him the strength he needed (though he wished they were now at his side to aid him). His many trials with them had tempered him to deal with such as this. Yet what fool would not be afraid of an enemy that could cause an army to vanish? Only a dead man would be fearless.

“Be gone foul spawn of the Underworld! Be gone I say, in the name of the King!” The figure's eyes blazed as it loomed up before him, perilous as a mantis before its prey.

“Try mortal foolish,” it hissed. Bullrammer did not wait. He attacked with great skill and force, performing the dance of death with an unfamiliar foe, giving the enemy no chance but to defend.

Long they fought within the vale, the General using his great broad sword and his foe casting words of fear that pierced his heart as arrows pierce the flesh unto death. It seemed as though they forever battled, the sun rising and setting three times followed by the moon. The nearness of his enemy had a chilling reaction to the very air about him. At night, sweat grabbed his flesh as icy frozen fingers, or solidified into his hair. In the heat of the day it cooled him, giving him unlooked for strength and aid from the enemy itself. His mind surged forward toward victory; there was no other way. The General denied the possibility of defeat. You see, he always was stubborn in that facet of the facts. Only the apparition's defeat was acceptable to him

. . .

. . . General Bullrammer's entire host of men had no knowledge of the event which had taken place in that valley. After it was over, he again beheld his army just as it was before. Sweat drenched his entire body, and he returned to his legion and called a council. While at council he rebuked his personal advisors, captains and scouts for not holding position until he had returned. All present testified that they had never changed ranks, nor had they left the valley. Boldly one of them stood forth and admonished his General for accusing them of such treason against he and his men.

Bullrammer grew silent, pondering the things which had happened. In the end he grew to understand the nature of this event which had befallen him, if only in part. He had been told stories, and had been a part of great quests, some of which were now fireside legends, and knew he was now caught within the plan of a powerful entity which had the heart and soul of blackness. He now cursed the day as it had happened to him.

They amassed an attack upon the city, twelve score and sixteen in number, leveling half the city in one day less than a fort-night. The death toll was high among the people; the King's military nearly destroyed. And even though three score and six dragons gave their lives in that shocking assault, all the people of Navan learned a bitter lesson. Dragons calculated, retaliated, held grudges.

Three days before the dragon attack was to end, General Bullrammer and his legion returned from the mountains to the palace. Startled beyond speech, he learned they had been absent from the Kingdom for almost one full year. But he had no time to wonder. His city was under attack. And so he and his men joined the battle. Yet it was too late. The dragons had spread their death amidst a now decaying city. Most all was wasted.

After the dragons withdrew, General Bullrammer was arrested and tried for treason by the King's Court. At the conclusion of a one day trial he was stripped of all rank and honor. And though the King dismantled him from all duties as a Knight, he would not loose his tongue as to the reason of the delay -- he would have been labeled as insane. His counselors testified that they had gone to hunt the dragons as ordered, and then come back as planned. But the King threw them all out in a rage, naming them liars and enemies of the people.

Kenneth would have been hung on the gallows (in fact a scheduled execution had been decreed by the King) but hundreds of Knights raised their voices in protest, some threatening to follow Bullrammer.

In a secret meeting a nervous King bargained Kenneth's life to him if he would help to restore order among his legions. Because of the Oath of Knighthood he had sworn, he did as the King bade and order was restored, yet only for a short time. It was because of this that he lived to begin the rebuilding of his beloved city.

In that fate-filled period of time something had happened to him, disturbing him greatly. And he would not speak of it to anyone, no matter how many inquiries were leveled his way. He was expelled from the castle, never to return. The survivors of the people, who had sent petitions to the Governor, asking him to

persuade the King to let the dragons be, riled the public to vengeance. Lynch mobs quickly formed and stormed the city, making their way to the Governor's mansion with ropes. But the dragons had done the job for them.

With blood still hot in their veins they made their way to the ruins of the castle where a one-week scourge of the remaining military began. Soon only the people remained, and all the Knights which denounced the royalty they served; and they were few. The King and his family were tried by an angry people and sentenced to death. Gallows were built, used, and then burned with fire to let all know that the peoples voice should be heard.

Kenneth Bullrammer witnessed it all, helpless to deliver the King which he had served for years; and he did try. Many former Knights tried to rescue the King. Most were slain, the people suffering the losses of ten to the Knights one. But the number of the people measured at least twenty to one. Nothing could be done, and soon it was ended.

As the King and his family swung lifelessly from ropes Kenneth looked at each face within the throng of people. Glee, amusement, savagery, blood-lust and satisfaction filled their countenances. In many areas of the city fights broke out, leaving many wounded and dead. But these fights were brought under control by the force of the people.

From that day forth they set up their own laws and chose a religious priest to be their leader. Just under five-hundred Knights had survived. All his adult years had been spent to protect this people. And what gift did they give in return? Barbarianism'.

One year later Kenneth married. Eleven years after, a son was born to him. He named him Garrion, after a man of greater strength and skill than his own. He was a trusted friend and a mighty warrior. He had been a good friend, teaching him the ways of the Warrior.

Kenneth's wife was happy beyond measure; they finally had their first born. General Bullrammer would often watch her and she held their son, smiling down upon him with a love he could never truly describe. Now and then she would report to Kenneth that their baby was in violation of the King's law, for he had stolen his eyes.

Kenneth often left the house on a pretended errand, despair overcoming him; a despair that would cause this grown man to weep bitterly . . . secretly. The recollection of the dark prophecy that apparition had sealed upon him long ago blackened his mind at times. Sometimes, if he tried hard enough, he could lock it away for days at a time. But it always came back to him; that prophetic day when he had faced that thing, battled with it, pitting his iron mind against it as well as his blade. His victory was a bitter and cold the dawning of his future.

His mind strayed, his vision blurred, flashing into the past; unbidden trespass. As if he were suddenly forced to meditate upon this very thought. It felt as if another mind was bending its will upon him, forcing him to think back upon that fate-filled day. For an instant he stiffened, as if an assassin's blade had pierced him from behind. Then the panic and fear of one who realizes he walks among enemies crossed his face. He felt as if he were suddenly intoxicated, as if he had just gulped down three pints of Dwarven Hammermouth. He felt twisted and stretched as if by many strong hands. The terrible impact of that which was upon him came as a reminder of the past. And with that recollection, Kenneth knew he was creating its - that apparition's - birth here in the future. He knew he could not hold out much longer. His mind felt as though it were slipping. Squinting, Kenneth rubbed his face with one hand. As he lowered his hand, his voice caught in his throat. His defeated foe was before him as if he was taken back to that valley . . .

. . . the cloak fell to the ground as General Bullrammer panted, sword raised into fighting position above his left shoulder. Within seconds the thing took shape within the folds of that night-black disguise, rising once again to its power and height, defiant of the winds that increased in fury through the valley, it's eyes flashing with hatred and malice.

“Won you have. Bested’ in battle me few have.” It raised hidden arms high and spit out a curse upon General Bullrammer:

All may seem good by fortunes fate,  
Life's dreams you might gain.  
Know you now I write the slate,  
An address of anguish and pain.

She shall bear your first born son,  
And say he has your eyes.  
But know you now he is the one,  
Through him I bring your demise.

When first I shall touch him I take you to me,  
Your wife's soul will forever be mine.  
For I am the shadow, I make all men see,  
The illusion of life sublime.

Then shall descend my darkness and wrath,  
I'll force your soul through my gate.  
With power I seal you to this blackened path,  
Bound by the power of hate.

As his eyes focused, Kenneth's breathing came to him in gasps. He could not find enough breath to sustain him.

Blackness engulfed him.

He awoke alone just like so many times before, alone and in terrible fear. The fear he felt was not for himself, but for his beloved wife and child. This memory vividly haunted him much, and was an ever increasing manifestation. He knew he must do something. There was not much time left. He must save his family. A plan began to germinate within his heart and mind.

Fourteen years passed.

Garrion Bullrammer was born in Navan, June twenty sixth, fourteen years after the dragon-strike on the city. He grew up with his family the first six years of his life playing among the ruins with his childhood friends. He was a happy child, larger and more sober than the others. Kenneth watched Garrion slowly mature from a child into a young man.

At night, his dreams often recited that curse so long ago. He dreaded the passing of time as he recalled the phantom's curse. He relished and savored days gone by, remembering them as the good old days when things were more peaceful. How ironic it was that such thoughts should hatch themselves within his mind. At times he would catch his thoughts and place them in check, remembering all the death during Dragon Wars.

With the passing of each day he regarded them as safe moments in which he found himself hiding at times. Every thought spent meditating upon the future was spent with a growing dread. But once passed by he relished in its safety.

Time sped on.

At the age of twelve he had taken to helping his family and friends reconstruct their homes. He especially liked helping Mr. Guildings. Mr. Guildings would give all helpers a treat after each task was accomplished, which kept a constant stream of helpers at his disposal. It was actually quit brilliant. Garrion also worked hand in hand with other neighbors, families, relatives and strangers, lending his aid whenever and wherever he could.

Garrion talked little to the others his age, mostly keeping to himself. An accident which had crippled him for a few months had left his voice permanently damaged. The other children would make fun of him when he stuttered out his sentences with great difficulty. At times his father would stop him as he worked frantically on a pile of rubble. He would put a large arm around his son and say, "Garrion, stop working so fast. Just keep up a good pace. It is good that you are willing to work hard, but don't let others get you so upset that you become foolish. These ruins could bury you if you aren't careful. Remember what has happened to you already with the accident and all?" With tears in his eyes Garrion would smile and squeeze his father's arm. And even though it helped to have his father understand him, it still cut like a knife to have his "friends" be so mean to him. Often times he caught himself wishing that they had his problem so that they could understand him. Things would be . . . better.

Like a Shadow Cat, Kenneth always stalked and observed Garrion unnoticed; as if something would suddenly snatch him away. No one ever noticed the subtle ways in which Kenneth protected his son (not even his family).

At the age of fourteen his father took Garrion on a trip in the family wagon. They left Navan before the sun peaked over the eastern mountains and rode on in silence out through the tall fields of corn at either side of the road. Garrion could sense seriousness about his father.

In silence, he huddled within his cloak, keeping the early morning chill from making his teeth chatter. They traveled for three days, toward a mountain range. Their destination: The valley where it all began.

Kenneth always faced his fears. He knew that If he could place himself within the mind - understand the motive - of an enemy, victory could be more easily achieved. In taking his son up here into these mountains, Garrion would be conditioned. His mind could be touched by the experience. This would callous his emotional senses. In this manner, Kenneth Bullrammer thought to weather his son to situations he would some day face. It was a beginning.

On the third day they pulled into a beautiful valley, full of bees and insects, rabbits and birds, and a diversity of wildlife. Kenneth brought the wagon to a halt at the center of the valley.

Garrion watched his father jump down and walk to the back of the wagon. A canvas hid something large beneath it. Garrion's curiosity had been aroused when his father had asked him to accompany him on a trip. He inquired where they were headed, but his father only replied, "You'll know soon enough young man. It's a surprise." Now his curiosity was at a peak as his father took hold of the canvas and looked at Garrion.

"Garrion. I have brought you here to give you something -- a gift. I have also brought you here to train you in the ways of the Knight, as I am." He stripped back the covering to reveal a large hard-wood chest. Reaching within his tunic his father drew out a silver chain strung through a shiny silver key. Pulling it from about his neck, his father motioned to him.

"Come here son. I want you to open it. All that is here", he pointed at the chest, "is now yours. Come." With a broad smile Garrion bounded clumsily down from where he sat and rounded the wagon, stopping before his father, who held out the key. Eagerly, he reached for it, but his father closed his large hand around it before he could get it.

"Before you open it there is something you must promise me." Garrion nodded. His father's eyes hardened, and his voice became almost cold.

"This is not a light matter. I ask only that you promise me - no, yourself - that you will always, always, take this with all seriousness of heart. Promise me this and what is in the chest is yours." Garrion sobered and looked his father squarely in the

eyes, noting the strict charge of what he was being asked. Something in his father's voice sent a chill creeping down his spine, waking him up to the reality that his father was not playing games. This was serious.

"I s-s-swear it-t b-by our f-f-family n-n-n-n-name." He stuttered, the cold not helping him to complete his oath. Being satisfied by his son's promise he took Garrion's hand and turned it palm up. Slowly he pressed the key into his hand and closed his fingers around it, stating, "It begins." Garrion did not understand what his father meant as he fit the key into the lock. When the chest opened he gasped in amazement. His father moved to his side and whispered.

"Armor, broad sword, morning star and dagger. I've kept them in the best of condition. A year ago, the leathers were replaced, and the plating oiled and polished. Go ahead, take them out. Let's get you suited up. You'll have a lot of time to get familiar with them. I think this armor would protect you from a collapsing building."

Garrion looked at the three weapons, then decided on the morning star. Grasping its handle, he lifted it from the chest. His father smiled and reached for the sword.

From then on, once per moon, they came to this very spot. Kenneth began training his son as a Knight, as he was trained long ago at the hand of Garrion. Each day, after finishing up their daily labors, both secretly practiced in the back yard of their home. Kenneth built a tall fence to keep out prying eyes. The old and fallen order of The Knighthood had been abolished years back. Stories of the Knight's deeds, which had brought on the dragon-strike, were still spread across the land in hushed whispers, filled with growing animosity. Kenneth had to be careful.

Day after day, week after week, moon after moon, Kenneth taught his son the Way of The Warrior. And even though, up until this time, Garrion had never held a weapon of war in his hand, he had the gift. Kenneth's hope sprung to life as he saw his son master the techniques which he himself struggled with in his early years. Of all the weapons he knew, his favorite remained the morning star. Slowly Garrion gained more strength and coordination of body. He grew used to the armor; filled

into it in the next few years.

Five years passed.

Some of the dead fire-breathers, which had perished in the waters off the coastline, ruined the once thriving fishing industry. It was in the nineteenth year after the battle that the creatures of the sea had fully trusted the waters once again. The people had to rely on agriculture to survive. As the fishing returned, many were now turning their nets and baskets once again to the sea in great hopes of a more productive life.

It was in this period of his life that Garrion caught sight of the attractive Syla, who helped by bringing food to the workers as the reconstruction proceeded. She always brought him a larger portion of food each time she made her rounds, and lingered just a bit longer in his company.

Garrion was never very self secure. He had been teased unmercifully as a youth because he was clumsy and spoke with a stutter. But in the last five years his peers began to sense something in him; something in his posture and the way he held himself. The teasing and jeering quickly stopped, turning to respect. Syla made him feel important -- loved. It did him right among the other young men to be seen with a beautiful young woman. In time, they became the closest of friends as they worked together to rebuild their lives, and the lives of those around them.

Over the years they became closer and closer. At the age of nineteen he proposed to her and she accepted. They were to be wed in three moons.

Jobs began and jobs were finished. Garrion began working on rebuilding the ruins of the Baxter Manor, that, once completed, would be a small, civil military base. He earned wages enough to support Syla and himself quite comfortably.

He was so charmed by her. Her long black wavy hair, her fair skin, and that loving smile always gave her away in a crowd. If ever he saw her approaching, he was struck still, and could only watch her as she gracefully neared. Her gift of a smile, and the glow in her eyes, always lightened his mood, even on the most stressful of days. They could talk for hours on end. And once he came to the realization that her look was other than playful, it was escape he sought – escape that always ended him up in her arms, enjoying the whole world.

Garrion thanked all of creation for this woman, who, if taken from his life, would leave him in a bottomless void. She never expressed her devotion for him in words. And if he asked, she would always give him that said it all. In truth, Syla held him in the palm of her hand, as if he were a mere puppet.

“Have you chosen where we are to live after we are wed?” she would ask at times. He could see, she knew how to play the game well; cunning as a dragon . . . harmless as a dove.

Every time he saw her at the end of the day he would pick her up by her thin waist, holding her high. He was clumsy and heavy footed, but she overlooked that. She did not care. He was well mannered and respectful. And he was delightedly interested in her. He was a gentleman.

One day after Garrion had finished a day's work and had just entered the front gate to his yard, he saw three strangely dressed men and one robed woman just leaving his house. Upon seeing Garrion, his father preceded them and gently pulled him to them.

“Garrion I would like you to meet some friends of mine.” Garrion bowed clumsily and awkwardly returned questions asked him, extremely embarrassed to have to stagger out his greetings to strangers. He was taken back when they neither laughed nor smirked at the way he spoke. He was treated with the same respect he gave them. This pleased him, though his reluctance to be there was scrawled across his face.

There was one present that dwarfed his father in size. His arms and legs were as thick as a small tree, and looked to be as sturdy. He had the same name as himself but knew nothing of the connection.

One gray haired man, tall and lean, wore a green-brown, weather-stained cloak with a wolf head brooch fastened at the neck. The wolf's slanted eye sockets were inlaid with rubies which sparkled in the light of a nearby lamp's radiance. It seemed odd, but it felt to Garrion as though the brooch was watching him. He could hardly take his eyes from it. He suspected this man was a tracker, or a specialized scout of some sort.

The young woman wore the robes of an apprentice, that was clear. His father had taught him things like this ever since he was young. She stood close to the old man, quietly, hands folded within the white sleeves of her robes, as if waiting for something. Her name was Ashley. After making his acquaintance she did not speak again, her arms resuming their previous position within the sleeves of her robes.

The man named Merdreth, whom Ashley stood next to, bowed gracefully to Garrion in greeting. Taking the opportunity Kenneth Bullrammer patted his son's shoulder.

“They were just passing through. You are lucky to meet them. Garrion, please go inside. Your mother wishes to speak with you.” He had noticed his son's

hesitation to be there. Garrion bowed respectfully to each in turn and excused himself. Kenneth watched his son enter the house with a slight smile, his eyes darkening as his son grew farther away.

As Garrion entered the house Kenneth's eyes changed from the casual mask it had been, to that of deep concern and fear.

“Merdreth, will this work against such an adversary?” The old man knuckled his back and stretched a bit.

“I hope so my fine friend. I hope so. I shall speak no more of it, and neither shall any of you. The more we discuss this lunacy of an idea the stronger the enemy shall become. I am even more powerful than I used to be, yet my body is not.” He looked squarely at Kenneth.

“We must make preparations, Kenneth.” He turned to the large man standing next to Kenneth.

“Stay and watch the house . . . unseen.” The wizard looked at the one with the Wolf’s head brooch.

“Borlag, be with him. Watch each other's back.” The two nodded as the old wizard turned away.

“Off with you both. Kenneth, Ashley, come. Walk with me.”

Late that evening Kenneth came walking back to the house, knowing he was being watched by the most trusted companions he had ever been privileged to know. This is why he had requested them by letter. He knew the time was near at hand when their presence might hold his mind together (his family as well - if only halfway).

As he entered the house he saw his wife Andrea and Garrion visiting and laughing together in the kitchen through the dining room archway. A sudden lump in his throat caught and he choked. His eyes stung as he turned left, climbing the stairs to his bedroom, deep in thought.

Kenneth rubbed his faced with his hands, wishing this was all a dream, knowing it was not. He should have been prepared for this. Certainly he knew this

day had to come. Garrion was now a trained a Knight. Looking out his bedroom window into the darkened street he whispered softly.

“Garrion, I hope you can weather this storm. It breaks too soon. If you cannot, I lose her. Then I have no choice but to follow. I need her. I will never leave her side. No not even if I must enter into the escapeless’ Abyss itself. To follow her, should she be taken, I would take hold the shadows terrible hand . . . this time.” Through the window, Kenneth Bullrammer looked up into the starry sky being overtaken by an incoming storm as he wiped the falling tears from his face.

He remembered, years ago, when he had defeated the phantom within that accursed valley. On returning to his men, according to their word, not one moment of time had passed from the time in which he had been thrown from his horse until he had been reunited with his men. A memory flashed in his mind. He could see himself at that meeting . . .

. . . “General Bullrammer - sir - you fell from your steed, regained your feet and then returned,” the trusted leaders of his legion had declared. They had spoken the truth.

He knew it would be useless to stay by his son's side. He would merely blink and it would all be over. According to Merdreth, staying at his son’s side would weaken him – something about blood ties and emotion giving the enemy strength. Another thing the old man had told him, was something about a curse broken only by separation from Garrion. He did not want to know all the details. He trusted Merdreth enough to stake his and Andrea’s very life on every word he said. His eyes clouded, blotting out the stars as he prayed.

“Vannar, please help my son. I have given everything I have had in life for the cause of justice and honor. I know I deserve less than the air I breath, but I need my wife; my very heart's existence. I beg, favor my son's strength to defeat my enemy. Please.”

He spent the rest of the evening with his wife and son.

Before leaving for work the next morning, Garrion kissed his mother goodbye,

then departed.

After he was gone for some time, a dark-clad figures appeared from the shadows of a nearby alley and walked slowly towards the Bullrammer's residence. As he approached, a carriage pulled up, stopping in front of the house as they neared the door.

Hearing the sound of horses out front, Kenneth went to the front door and opened it to see himself standing there in silence, adorned in dark apparel, nearly blending in with the dark of night.

“We are ready,” he stated. Kenneth’s wife appeared beside him, her eyes suddenly sparkling with delight. Kenneth turned with a nod, avoiding her eyes as guilt washed across his face. In silence, both walked out of the house, making their way to the wagon, where Borlag greeted her with the mask of a smile forced across his face. With a warm greeting, she held out a hand to Kenneth, who knew that later she would hate them all if this did not turn out in victory. Kenneth took her hand, helped her into the wagon and climbed in after.

As the carriage drove off Kenneth looked back at his home. Within the doorway stood he and his wife, apparently chatting about something. In was baffling to see them talking casually, as if nothing was amiss. Of course, they were merely illusions; copies of themselves. It was fascinating just how real they appeared. This was getting quite complicated. Merdreth’s magic was at work, leaving no trace of their passing into the predawn hours. Even the carriage made no sound as it rolled through the city street. As the coach headed for the edge of the city, he took his wife’s hand, his thoughts and hopes turning to his only son.

Merdreth's timing was critically precise. Of course, he was a wizard. One day later would have shattered everything Kenneth yearned for. Merdreth knew the creature had come.

Every evening Syla would pick Garrion up from work with her father's wagon. This evening she did not come at the expected hour. A messenger boy, who became a bronze piece richer, delivered the message saying that she would be there as soon as she could. This gave Garrion some time to himself. Time to relax from a hard day's work.

Setting his back against a wall of rocks he was currently reconstructing, Garrion watched the early autumn sun laying itself to rest in the crimson horizon. Sighing heavily, his thoughts turned to Navan. *I'm tired of this city being in such ruin. I've worked all my life with others who want it cleaned up and rebuilt. But they seem to have drifted off into their own paths and destinies, forgetting their own home. I think my future is to stay here, he sighed wearily, and work alone if I must. If everyone would help, it could be done in a matter of five years at best.*” Again he heaved out a long and exhausted sigh and laid his head back against the stones, shutting his eyes and taking advantage of the last rays of the sun.

“Garrion. Garrion.” He awoke to see the master carpenter looking down on him. “Have you been here all night? Oh, you probably just came early.” Mr. Baxter turned, smiling in approval, then walked up the newly crafted walkway with the order to, “hop-to-it”, whistling to himself as he headed for the unfinished estate. Garrion's eyes turned to the eastern sky; the sun was rising. Something wasn't right.

“S-S-Syla!” His head rushed as he lumbered to his feet. Steadying himself he waited until he knew he could run straight without killing himself on the piles of wood and brick laying about the construction area. No sooner did his head clear than he charged down the street like a bull.

Speeding along as fast as his feet could carry him, he cut through allies to get to his destination as quickly as possible.

Finally, out of breath he came to her father's door and frantically knocked. The door shuddered slightly under his careless, stony rap. Again he pounded the door, though not as hard. He was afraid that he would be met by an angry guard. Again he rapped on the door, calling out to Syla.

The door swung open to a robe-clad, cranky old man who laid his reddened eyes upon Garrion, grunted, then abruptly he slammed the door in his face. Garrion knocked again, this time harder, a frown etching into his face. The door nearly popped its hinges. This time he did not care. When the door flew open the second time, Syla's father had one of his guards in front of him. Mr. Baxter looked angrily at Garrion, half covered by the guard's body.

“What do you want boy! Do you realize the hour?” “S-Syla.” The old man looked puzzled for a moment. Then he turned his head as his daughter descended the stairway behind him. She approached slowly and stood next to her father looking at Garrion.

“Who is this father?” Garrion grew wide eyed; her father became suspicious at once.

“You seem to know who my daughter is, but she obviously does not know you. Too much Kohakk last night? I suggest you leave at once or I'll call my guard down

on you son. Do you understand what I'm saying?" Suddenly Garrion laughed, a trace of hysteria in his voice.

"S-S-Syla, th-this is a g-good jok-ke, b-but its n-n-n-not funny to m-m-m-me."

"Joke? Who are you? Father he's frightening me!" She stepped back hastily, as if Garrion were a poised viper on the porch, waiting for that first leg to stretch itself out. From behind Syla, another guard appeared from seemingly out of nowhere placing himself in between her and Garrion, hand readied at sword's hilt.

"I'll have to ask you to leave. Now." The guard slid a long sword a hand's length out from its sheath in a warning gesture. He laughed as he looked narrowly at Garrion, obviously ridiculing the way he stammered. Garrion's eyes rolled upwards as blackness took him. A guard bent down over him cautiously and shook him.

He awoke from the nightmare to Sylva gently shaking him.

“Garrion”, she said in a hushed tone, “I’m here now. Wake up sleepy head.” As she watched him lift his head, the soft light of the dimmed lantern revealed tears streaking his face.

“What’s the matter?” she inquired, hugged him back as he launched into her arms, latching onto her tender frame as though he were about to lose her forever.

“D-don't l-l-leave m-m-me Sylva! Pl-please n-n-never l-leave m-me!” She looked lost for a moment and then realized he'd had a bad dream. She ruffled his hair playfully and frankly promised she would never leave him. Seeing the troubled look slowly slipping away, she gave him that look -- to take control. It worked, as usual.

After helping him to the wagon, he drove her home. After kissing her good night, he slowly walked home, deep in black thoughts. He hated that awful dream. But that feeling would not go away. He did not wish to press it with her and change her mood. It would have ruined the slow, enjoyable ride home. Maybe she would have been upset, thinking that -- “This is nonsense”, he thought, “What is past is past, done and done.”

When he turned down his street, Garrion spotted two friends he'd grown up with leaving his home. They looked sad as they walked down the small rose-clad pathway and out onto the street, pulling their hoods up to hide the silent mourning in their countenances.

As the wagon stopped, he jumped out and sprinted down the pathway, his heart growing dark. In through the front door he burst, and headed into the guest room. Looking around, he saw nothing out of the ordinary. But a sharp cry he knew to be from his mother sent him charging up the stairs and down the hallway to the door of his parents room. Entering in haste, he saw the family doctor there beside his mother, tending her as best he could. His father lay, still as stone next to her.

The doctor stood and beckoned him to his mother's side. Quickly Garrion went to her and knelt, a terrible fear gripping him as he took her hand in his. Unseen by Garrion, the doctor stepped up behind him, smiling wickedly. Then the doctor

became as living smoke and dissipated in a single breath. Garrion knelt and gently kissed her hand, his mind suddenly whirling.

“M-m-momma, wh-what happ-pened?” His mother started when he spoke to her, like a person jumping out of a terrible nightmare by the touch of another. Her eyes stared without focus at the ceiling as she gripped his hand firmly.

“My son”, she forced through clenched teeth, “it wants you! Don't give in! Never give in to it!”

“G-g-give in t-t-to wh-what?” She tensed as each muscle tightened in her body. A moment later she passed away, screaming in silence, clawing at the air before her. He held her close to him in shock, rocking her back and forth, back and forth, all the while his eyes fixed upon the still form of his pale father. He screamed for the doctor, but he was gone.

Garrion was truly alone.

He bitterly wept throughout the night, and when the sun began its ascent he laid the still frame of his mother back. As he lay his mother down, and covered her and his father with a blanket, he felt suddenly watched. Someone was here. He could feel it. He sensed awareness from behind him and quickly turned to an empty room. The doctor being gone seemed wrong; terribly wrong.

In a sudden fury of anger he inspected every part of the house, but it was as empty as his parents room. And though he was alone, he felt that something was groping towards him, reaching for him as if from a great distance. But there was only him, alone.

Chills cascaded over him, as if icy-cold water had suddenly poured from above and all the curtains in the front room moved. Feeling threatened to his very soul he ran to his room. Through the doorway he spotted the large wooden chest his father had given to him long ago. It set against the far bedroom wall. He stumbled through the door, making his way to it and knelt as he pulled on the silver chain from around his neck which held the key. Fumbling with the lock, his hands shook so that he failed to fit the key in. Stopping, he took a deep breath and counted to three. He tried again. The key snapped. He let out an exasperated cry, tensed, then abruptly

slammed his fist into the side of the chest. His hand rebelled in pain but he paid it no heed. Twice more, he stuck the wood, which yielded with a splintering sound. Huge muscles knotted and bulged in his arms and shoulders, as he took hold of each side of the new opening and pulled with all his might, trying to rip the chest apart in a panicked rage. He could not explain the fear he was suddenly plagued with, and it drove him into a desperation frenzy to tear the chest apart.

Abruptly the chest yielded, boards giving way from bolted seams. He ripped the lid off with a scream and looked into the chest, suspicious that what was once in it would not be there now. His fear was washed away at the sight of armor and weapons. He picked up the set of plate mail piece by piece, quickly buckling them onto his body as if in a race with an enemy that would soon be upon him.

After donning each piece, Garrion hastily checked each piece, making sure all was properly latched and strapped on tight. He then reached in his weapons, stood and strapped them upon his body.

His mother warned not to let it take him. What had she meant? His eyes blurred. Let what take him? His thoughts turned to his parents. With a strangled cry he put his plated fist down through the bottom of the chest and the floor it set upon. Rage filled his senses, causing his vision to blur. It was not until exhaustion took him that he slumped to the floor.

“M-m-mother . . . f-father?” Silence suddenly filled his mind as memories flooded down upon him. Memories of his father holding him after his accident, of his mother rocking him gently to sleep each night, singing to him. The art of practicing war and honor with his father in the back yard and in the valley far away flashed through his mind, stabbing into his heart.

Many memories flooded his vision, washing away all the rage, all the hate he was feeling. The last thing he saw was the three of them eating at the dining room table, talking and laughing, enjoying . . .

Garrion stood and straightened to his full height of a hand's length over six feet. He did not notice the weight of his armor. Each piece had sliding parts and hinges to it, mobilizing its wearer to impressive agility. Dark became his thoughts.

Whoever did this would pay with their own blood. At that thought, a steady calm seized him.

Narrowing his eyes, he scanned his surroundings, that feeling of being watched deepening.

Garrion awoke with a troubled whisper. He was holding his mother and rocking her back and forth, tears streaming his face. "I dream," he thought to himself. As his senses cleared, he raised one shaking arm. In his dream he had fully donned his armor. He was wearing it now, weapons fastened and buckled. He was ready for battle. Only it was still night, and moments after he had taken his mother into his arms. With a sob he pulled her to him, his tears wetting her hair as he stared in denial at his father laying so still. How could this have happened? How? His father was a general, and advanced the art of warfare. He had never been defeated.

Garrion felt empty – at a loss. After long moments passed he felt something enter into the room. Not knowing what it was he laid his mother back into the bed and stood, right hand closing around the handle of his morning star. A cold breeze swept through the room provoking chills and wild thoughts within him. Loose papers on a nearby dresser were caught up in the draft and carried around the room in circles, spinning through his parents chamber. Instinctively he armed himself with his morning star and crouched, expecting someone to suddenly rush him from some shadowy spot within the bedroom. He welcomed the thought and grimly smiled, ready for the chance to do battle with a foe who had killed his mother and father. He wanted vengeance.

His attention was drawn to the corner nearest him, where his parents lay still as stone, an expression of horror was their last expression. By the bedside next to his father he saw something there in the corner of the darkest part of the room. It was no more than a shadow at first. As he turned upon it, the darkness of the entire room seemed to drag its way to that point, shaping and forming itself into the appearance of a blackened cloak. The light of the nearby lantern seemed drawn into it as well, dimming until its light was extinguished. The cloak seemed to flow in the currents of some unseen wind, independent and defiant of the revolving gusts within the room. Two pale points of light emanated deep from within the hood, radiating a sickened and tainted light. Unholy it seemed to Garrion as it looked without feeling upon the forever sleeping couple.

Garrion's blood chilled within him. His mind screamed as the floor began to revolve underneath him. He fell to the stone-cold, wooden floor face up, groping for his fumbled morning star in vain. His hand fell across the dagger's hilt at his hip. His fingers slowly wrapping about it. He jerked it from its sheath as the thing turned towards him, those awful eyes flashing a pale, sickened luminescence in his way. Then it was above him, hovering like a vulture over his paralyzed body. With all his strength he slashed out at it. The dagger flew from his hand as the blade struck through its cloak. Instantly his hand lost feeling, followed by pain that set his bones alight with a chilled flame. The numbness that filled his hand, spread up his arm and into his shoulder as the dagger skidded across the floor and thumped against the far wall. Hissing in displeasure it scorned him like a faint, bitter-cold wind in his mind.

“Become, you will, what now am I.”

“N-n-no.” He whispered hoarsely. “No,” Garrion repeated. His mind reeled like a ship in a cyclone, threatening to be swallowed into the ocean's deep. He felt its frigid thoughts reach into his mind with a wrenching force that made his body shudder as he screamed helplessly, silently, despairingly. With the last conscious will of his being, Garrion fought its attack as his thoughts turned to his mother's last breath and final words. Helplessly he closed his eyes and resisted its power with every shred of strength left in his mind. Without emotion, it spoke again.

“Resist not me human. Useless to resist is it -- try. Welcome in me, welcome me in.” Garrion went lax. His muscles could keep their strength no longer. He looked up once more into the eyes of his enemy, so cold. As he began to lose consciousness, his thoughts held his mother's last words; her final warning.

“N-never,” he breathed, his breath falling from his lips as if he were out in freezing weather. “Never.”

Garrion awoke to water dripping onto his face, a gust of cold wind driving into his wet clothing. He started at the quick slash of lightning that invaded the sky above. The sound of metal rimmed wheels on a cobble-stone street approached. He sat up, his muscles rebelling from having formed to the rocks he'd set his back against. As the wagon advanced his way he noticed the driver was wrapped in a black cloak, head bent downward. He recognized the wagon and the horse as it neared. They belonged to Mr. Hall, Sylva's father. It moved slowly by him, as if he was yet dreaming, witnessing everything in slow motion, as if all was submersed in deep water. A thick fog blanketed the ground as far as the eye could see. As the wagon neared, the rider looked up slowly and turned to face him. Garrion's mouth dropped open.

“S-Sylva!” He was glad to see her. Finally she had come to pick him up. But as she looked at him Garrion noticed her eyes were glazed over, as if she had no comprehension. He called out to her in vain again as she neared. The sight before him seeded a deep terror within his heart. He could not recall ever having felt so alone.

Struggling to his feet, Garrion took one step toward the horses to stop them but his feet became burdensome. When he had first awoke he knew he was not wearing his armor. Now his Knight's armor was once again upon him. As if a wizard had cast a spell upon his armor to change its density to that of lead, he felt himself being dragged down with every step. Just without reach of the wagon, he fell to his hands and knees, failing to will himself further. He cried out to her as she turned away, hanging her head down once again.

The horse snorted, sounding like the thunder in the sky above him. The noise of it cracked so heavily that all the lamps hanging within all the doorways as far as the eye could see began to burst and shatter. Like a wave of destruction it destroyed both glass and light source until all was left in darkness. Windows exploded outward into the streets as both rows of houses yielded up all their more fragile wears, raining down into the streets. Unsound homes shook, wavered, and then collapsed in heaps

of rubble and dust, mingled with the sudden screams of those within. The damage of the merciless shower of glass shards was stayed by his armor as he prostrated himself to the ground and covered his face with his arms, crying out in astonishment. Garrion raised his head, knowing this had to be another nightmare. Amazed and shocked, he took in the destructive scene before him, even as the wagon rolled past.

“The back wheel!” He thought desperately. “One . . . two . . . three!” He lunged with all his might for it as it rolled like a giant stone revolved down the empty street. His hand caught hold of the rim, dragging him to his feet. At its touch, his hand began to feel heat seeping through the metal of his armor. All too soon his hand was burnt and he screamed without sound as the rumble of the wagon on the cobblestones filled the air about him like the thunder rolling in the sky above.

All about him the remainder of the sturdy homes collapsed and fell into ruin as if struck by an earth quake. Rock exploded, cement split and wood splintered causing a shower of debris to rain down upon him, the cries of the dying filling the air. A large chunk of concrete struck him in the right shoulder. Even through his armor he still felt the terrible impact of it.

For fear of losing her, Garrion kept a firm hold on the wagon, gripping the wheel tight as it rolled on, his hand feeling the bite of fire. Once his feet were under him he staggered to the side of the wheel and slammed his weight into it as it slowly rolled onward, his shoulder rebelling against the effort. With both hands he clutched the turning wheel and heaved. With all his might he tilted the wagon upon two wheels. For a moment it teetered on the brink of overturning, or landing upright again. He knew if it fell back into place he would not get a second chance. With a last desperate effort he threw his body into the wagon. It swayed, then crashed onto its side. As it fell his mind was filled with a ghostly inhuman scream, as silent as the stars. The force of it caused him terrible pain. The girl plunged onto the cobblestones with a scream and then went still as Mr. Hall's horse broke loose from the harness and bolted in fear, thundering off into the darkness. The pounding of its hooves shook the earth causing Garrion to stagger.

Gripping the sides of his helm, in a vain attempt to keep out that hideous cry

in his mind, he cried out in misery. Gritting his teeth he fought back the urge to faint . . . without success.

His vision blurred, then slowly focused as cold rain brought him back to consciousness. He unsteadily regained his feet, taking in the destroyed buildings all about him. Suddenly, his mind caught hold upon a terrible thought.

“Syla!” he cried out, and staggered to her side, noticing her legs were pinned under the wagon. Instinctively he reached down and gripped underneath the side, heaving the wagon from her broken legs with a strength that he could not possibly have had in him. The wagon slammed against a pile of rubble, once a beautiful home, as he knelt beside her still form and turned her slowly and carefully to face him. Jerking his hands back he gaped in startled amazement as his hands became cold. From within the hood of the black cloak she wore two pale star-like eyes began to glow. The cloak shifted as if it were alive. It was not her, but a shadow deeper than night, deeper than the darkest corner of the world, black as the eternal void of the abyss. Its eyes kindled as two burning coals as it rose up before Garrion. He staggered back from his enemy, catching his footing on a beam and falling to the ground. As it spoke within his mind, he clasped his hands to each side of his head, trying desperately to block out its terrible voice.

“Mine tonight will you be.”

“No! Mother, father! Help me!” Garrion shrieked within himself. He felt as if he were going mad. A few strides away was a partially fallen building. He tuned over and began to crawl towards it as that haunting voice followed him. As he approached the ruins Garrion looked desperately for some sort of a hole to hide himself in, and found one. Into the opening he wormed. As he struggled through, he came into an opening filled with the bodies of the dead.

Behind him, the apparition followed, its eyes glowing as fire; white-hot molten spheres within that hooded cloak of night.

Garrion grew wide eyed with horror as he witnessed the dead, crushed by the fallen debris. He moved away from them, backing towards the opening, into the reach of the phantom, not knowing what he feared more, the thing which hunted him,

or the dead before him. As if reading his thoughts a voice came to Garrion softly, subtly.

“Fault yours is that dead they are. Caused you it by me resisting. Hopeless against me are you. Garrion, take you I can away where happiness find you will with others all forsaken as they are.” Tears filled Garrion's eyes and his heart ached as he looked at the people . . . he had killed. Yes, he had killed them all. It was his fault. All he would have to have done was give himself to this thing that wanted him and they would have been spared.

With a cry he knelt and began to strip his armor off, piece by piece, throwing each section down with spiteful curses against himself, until he was only in his clothing, shivering, teeth chattering, looking upon his handy work of destruction.

With a shout he dove back through the small opening, brushing the folds of its cloak, making contact with it, but this time was spared the numbing chill of this apparition, and the mind boggling effect upon his senses. The cloaked entity watched him go . . . and waited.

He ran to each destroyed home in hopes of finding someone left alive. Yet, every decimated structure he searched, revealed the same - death. Through that section of the city he searched, looking for any left yet alive. On he searched and searched and searched.

Exhausted, Garrion finally stumbled through a fallen door into a home half destroyed. He recognized it as Mr. Hall's home; Syla's father. Making his way unsteadily through the wreckage, Garrion searched for what he hoped he would not find. But his hope was in vain. He found her. Her legs pinned by a fallen beam. From the looks of the scene her death had been slow and painful. She was gone. He knew there was nothing he could do for her now except weep for her precious loss. His mind reeled as he knelt down and touched her. She was still warm. It was his fault she had died . . . just as that thing had whispered to him. His fault. He wished to join her. Join her in death.

Now, shattered to the very core of his soul, he wearily staggered back to that place where he had overturned the wagon. Awaiting his arrival, Garrion spotted his

enemy, the living cloak flowing with uncanny ease against the raging storm in the night.

“W-w-why d-did all these p-p-people h-have t-to d-die? M-my Sylas d-d-dead! M-my m-mother, father, e-ev-everyone!”

“This what is happens to who of those resist mine that is the power. Now with me come you will? And you no more cause deaths.”

“Y-y-y-yes.” The shadow held out a black formless shape, what Garrion thought to be its hand. He lifted his to it and placed it into shadow . . . willingly.

“Over is it for you. Sylas next mine will be.” Garrion's heart leapt as he heard her name in the tense that she was still alive. He bellowed and jerked with all his might to free himself from the blackness that held him in its iron grip. As he pulled, the flesh from his hand tore loose exposing bone and muscle. He screamed in anguish and staggered back, holding his right hand close to his body.

The wagon steadily moved onward far out on a lonely road, within the plains. Merdreth had been watching, studying, Kenneth and Andrea, his gaze never leaving them. Ashley sat next to him attentive, as if waiting for something.

Of a sudden, Kenneth gripped his right hand with his left as if he'd just been bitten by a dreaded Toxin Spider. His sleeping Andrea turned pale and sighed weakly as her head slumped forward. It was evident that something was happening. Merdreth leaned toward them intently, eyes glistening like the many natural facets of Ironese Crystal in the rays of the sun. He began to chant softly, yet forcefully, his words straining with every syllable he uttered. With a sigh Kenneth looked up at him, strengthened. Then his worried gaze fell upon his beloved wife.

“Come on son. Please,” he whispered.

“Silence!” hissed Ashley as if she were a snake. She quickly raised her hands in front of Kenneth, patterning the formation of a spell. Kenneth did not know what type of magic it was, but he knew these movements were for conjuring. Arcane words flowed from Ashley’s mouth faster than Kenneth could make them out. A light emanated from the old man as Kenneth heard the name of his son on his lips seven times. Then the light was gone and the wizard slumped to the side, exhausted, sweat beading his face. Ashley continued to chant and braced her body against his to support him from falling forward, all the while giving Kenneth a look that dared him to help. Kenneth remained silent, shutting his eyes, bending his mind upon his son . . . and prayed.

The shadow loomed up into a menacing form of darkness over Garrion. Something had changed after he cried out in surprise and terrible pain. He was stronger, that life draining feeling no longer cursing him.

Fleeing to his pile of armor and weapons, he snatched up his morning star and his broad sword and turned to face his nightmare. The hilt of his blade burned dreadfully within the grip of his wounded hand, but he noticed it only with a surge of raw power which built up within him. Bellowing out a challenge he rushed his foe, both weapons tracing the battle patterns which he had been taught by his father. Lightning flashed from the heavens above seven times, striking the cloaked figure. As the lightning tore into it, the sound of a thousand screams from the Underworld rose up piercing the night seven times as Garrion fell upon it in his wrath.

Arcing between his two weapons, death from the clouds above blazed, yet Garrion was unharmed. With the rage, not unlike that of a mother bear protecting her young, Garrion let fall his morning star and blade many times upon the phantom. And as his enemy fell, the earth around the cloak shattered, throwing Garrion back against a pile of rubble.

Dropping his weapons he gripped his head and writhed in pain upon the wet ground. He dimly recalled wishing he had kept his armor on. After a moment he removed his bloody hands and stared at them; one deformed beyond healing, burning like fire.

In a haze, Garrion focused his attention to the street and watched the spot where the cloak lay. He felt his strength diminishing and knew that if it was still alive he would not be able to put up any significant defense against it a second time. His legs told him that soon they would rest, like it or not. His stomach pitched in his gut threateningly as his eyes beheld the cloak take shape again, those eyes dim, yet slowly regaining that awful light within. Rising up, as if from the dead, it glided toward him in silence and stopped just without arms reach.

Merdreth raised his head, fumbled for the top of the carriage seat and turned toward Ashley.

“Now,” he hoarsely commanded. Without responding to him her hands elevated, joining together at the thumbs, palms facing straight forward to the opposite side of the carriage. She stared into the back of her hands as though looking through them, eyes fixed on nothing. Chanting filled the air and she grimaced, the muscles in her delicate jaw twitching from some abrupt inner conflict. Beads of perspiration formed at her temples and broke into tiny rivulets of sweat that slowly made their way down to her chin. She began to tremble, only slightly at first. But as the moments passed on she began to waver, as if she were losing some obscure battle which only she could feel.

Merdreth slowly turned to her. A second song of magic filled Kenneth's ears as the old wizard touched his forefinger to Ashley's left temple. The former Knight wrapped his arms around his wife and held her close, watching in apprehension, witnessing the two work their sorcery. The entire coach was seething in a power he could almost touch, taste, see. Time crawled to a near standstill as the two cast their spells.

Then, shuddering openly, Ashley sighed. Her body relaxed. The hint of a smile scarcely etched itself across her thin face as she fell forward into Merdreth's arms. He caught and steadied her, holding her close to him, sudden concern etched into his aged face. With a voice that sounded like two granite blocks grinding together he called out to her.

“Ashley! Ithellion nu amur!” For a brief instant, Kenneth witnessed a personage of white flee from the old man and enter into Ashley. It shimmered, then subsided into her being. The carriage staggered and shook violently, briefly. The coach abruptly stopped as the aged wizard and Ashley fell to the floor, unmoving.

Quickly the door to the carriage opened and Borlag leapt inside, graceful as a cat. He took the limp body of Ashley and laid her on the seat while Garrion, Kenneth's former trainer, tended to the old man. A grave look crossed his face as all

looked on, apprehensive as to what would happen next. Kenneth shook his head in disbelief.

“He’s gone,” was all he said. Borlag’s eyes filled with tears and he placed a hand to his face and lowered his head.

The apparition's eyes blazed brightly as it looked down upon Garrion. As the specter focused upon him, a power overcame the son of Kenneth Bullrammer he could not shake. It gripped him with chain-binding strength as he found he could do nothing, save listen and believe the phantom's next utterance . . . a reluctant prophecy in his behalf.

Know you now this life you live  
This life of pain and pleasure

Your life and hers I now do give  
A world of precious treasure

A shudder rippled through the entity as Garrion listened to its voice wail on, as if forced to continue by some power greater than its own:

Your first born son, he shall lead  
A nation filled with power

And challenge evil, death and greed  
To oppose an evil hour

A life of pleasure you both shall live  
I seal it with my might

A life of freedom I do give  
Beginning hence this night

Hissing dreadfully, it bowed, shaking in bridled rage. With a mind-splitting wail it vanished, leaving Garrion shaking uncontrollably. He let out a quavering

breath, gasping for air, moaning as he looked about the area.

Across the road stood a lone wall that looked welcoming to sit against. He crossed the street not knowing if he had the strength to even walk that far. But somehow he found himself a pace from it. It all seemed surreal, dreamlike. Moving against the wall, he placed his back against it. Before sitting down he slid down the cold, wet stone, Garrion looked around, taking in both ruin and death. This was the Baxter Manner he'd been working on for so long. With a heavy grunt he fell back down against the small construction of bricks and leaned his head against the wall, crying out in pain. Garrion knew he was going to die, here . . .

Slowly a wagon rolled toward the street where he sat, slumped against the wall. A cloaked, hooded figure reigned in on a white mare carrying a lantern in one hand and something in the other, though he could not make out what it was. The wagon came to a stop. The figure jumped to the street and ran towards where Garrion sat.

Again, everything moved in a motion slower than normal. He could only move his eyes as he looked about at the ruin which lay before him. The stench of blood and death lay heavy in the air.

Pulling the hood back from her head, Syla knelt down and looked at him. An icy, cynical look. He tried to explain but his voice was lost. He could only mumble in his dazed condition. A knife sparkled in the light of the lantern she was carrying. The blade darted for his neck. With a quick motion he jerked his head to the left, causing his body to move just enough to avoid the knife in the throat. It struck deep into his shoulder, cutting through to the bone. His eyes shot wide with the surprise of the unexpected attack.

“I’ll kill you for what you did to me! Do you hear me?! I’ll kill you Garrion . . . kill you Garrion . . . kill Garrion . . . Garrion . . . Garrion . . . . Garrion are you . . . Garrion please. Oh no, Garrion please I -” His eyes focused slowly and he stared up into his murderer’s face. His shoulder was in terrible pain from the dagger she had stabbed him with. He could feel her twisting the blade. With an effort he reached his hand up and grabbed the dagger from her . . . no dagger; just her hand. His shoulder hurt unmercifully.

333 “You’re going to be okay,” she wept. His eyes focused on Syla’s and he sobbed out in relief, looking past her at all the homes . . . standing intact. All the windows whole, lamps hanging in doorways. His head screamed in pain as he raised a hand to his shoulder, then quickly hid it within his torn shirt – it was half gone. Syla noticed and removed her cloak and wrapped it around his hand and arm, tears of concern streaking her face.

“You’re sweating so badly . . . what happened?” Her words choked short as he forced a smile to calm her. Syla helped Garrion stand.

“My parents, Sylva, my parents. We must get to them. I -- what . . . what . . .” Sylva was looking at him as if he had struck her.

“Garrison, your voice. You're talking like you did before the accident.” Without hearing her he staggered to the wagon and struggled up into it.

“Please Sylva. My parents.” He looked up into the night sky. “Please don't let it be true. Let it be just a dream.” The burning pain from the wound of his hand sent the truth slicing through his heart. Deep within he knew it had been no dream. Not that part of it. Sylva got him settled and jumped nimbly into the wagon, giving him a horrified look.

Kenneth Bullrammer smiled as tears of joy and sadness streaked his face. His wife awoke with a murmur, mumbling something about Bards. He kissed her forehead and held her as she smiled up at him, still oblivious to the whole situation. That was half the plan; to protect her through all this.

Merdreth had been taken by Borlag to his birth place for burial. It had always been in his demands to have it this way should something happen to him.

Ashley was awake and standing away from the others in silence. Her arts had saved his son from the same curse which had come upon him, but had exacted a terrible price. Silently, Kenneth approached and stood beside her, not knowing what to say.

“Merdreth was my friend and my family Ashley. I am sorry.” Tears began to form in his eyes and soon spilled down his weathered cheeks. “I thank you for my son’s life – our lives. I can never repay what you have done for us all.” Kenneth glanced over at Ashley. She was staring at him intently. Placing a hand on Kenneth’s arm, she bent close, looking into his eyes.

“Kenneth, when I was taken on by Merdreth it was for a reason. He said I was to be his last apprentice; and I had a very special job in taking on that role. Since I was ten years of age, and I am twenty-four now, I have been taught in the arts tending towards Supernaturalism. Do you know the basics of what I speak, or anything about it?” Kenneth shook his head. Ashley continued.

“Supernaturalism is the study of transcendentalism . . . Kenneth, the art of life. I have given my soul existence to the study of life and death. Something happened back on the wagon. I won the victory over that creature, but . . . Kenneth, it destroyed me. Do you see what I’m getting to?” Perplexed, Kenneth shook his head. Ashley bit her lip and grimaced. “Okay, let me explain the path of the Supernaturalist. This type of, for lack of a better word, spell-caster develops his or her own destiny. The destiny I have chosen is to live again under this same sun, yet not in this physical form. For instance, legends have it that some have been granted the power to take the form of an animal, or another race such as elf, dwarf, dryad, or the creature of their

particular choosing. I am one of those. My choice is to be Woodland Dryad . . . if I prove myself worthy. And that is the key to it all, to prove myself worthy. To accomplish this goal, I had to find a master to whom I would serve faithfully and without flaw to the end. Now are you understanding, or do I need to be more plain in my manner of speech?" Kenneth's eyes widened in disbelief.

"What manner of power is this, that you can take another form?" Ashley threw him a rueful smile.

"You are not thinking past the stage of merely being amazed that this can be. Open up your mind more, Kenneth Bullrammer, and quit thinking like a warrior. You may have been trained well, yet still you have not the mind for this sort of thing. Are all warriors as stubborn of mind as you are?" Ashley continued without waiting for an answer.

"Kenneth, I was the only Supernaturalist who could be taken on as an apprentice at the time that Merdreth accepted me. He had no choice in me. So do not judge nor mock what you are about to learn, for it is not in your right to do so. Now I will come to the point since you will refuse to do so yourself. Kenneth, Ashley fulfilled her apprenticeship with the giving of her life for your son. Being Ashley's master and the future heir of her physical body, I had the solemn right to take it when she gave her life for Garrion. And so, as she fulfilled her destiny, passing away with the terrible strain of that battle, I took up residence in her. I had prepared a magic to restore her body to full strength, and thus it was safe to take it. That was her test, and we both agreed upon the outcome. Kenneth, I was getting old. This has been a great hope for me since I first began to train her as my apprentice." Speechless, Kenneth pulled his arm away from Ashley's hand and took a step back. He stared into Ashley's eyes for some hint of treachery, or the truth. All he found was his own doubts gnawing at him. Then he gave in and smiled victoriously. But Ashley (Merdreth) quickly parried.

"Rid yourself of that triumphant grin; it annoys me boy. You didn't think I would come all this way to do this grand favor without price did you? You owe me." Kenneth's smile deepened.

“Same old Merdreth. You haven't changed.” Ashley smirked.

“Never Kenneth. But my name is Ashley now. And best you keep that a secret to your grave boy, lest evil beset you at my hand.” Kenneth sobered and nodded, suddenly in full agreement.

Outside the wagon Kenneth heard Garrion, his master and trainer, quietly state (in his thunderous whisper, which always failed the attempt of secrecy), “Same ol' Kenneth. He hasn't changed one bit.”

Kenneth looked up into the cloudy sky and prayed his son would make it through life. All those years of preparation. He knew he had won.

As the coach moved on into the night, Ashley's eyes burned with a glittering triumph that was not related to Kenneth's victory.

The priest said, "Peacefully they were taken home to the Seven Havens." The coffins were lowered. As the first shovel of earth was thrown down onto the coffins, Garrion unsheathed his broadsword and gave his parents the Knight's Sending; the tradition of saying farewell to those Knights who had died honorably in battle. The ritualistic words which would open up the Sealed Door to the Havens above, he spoke. He then sheathed his blade and stepped back into his place to be met by the delicate hand of his fiancee.

As the last words and prayers were spoken, Garrion felt Sylva's hand tighten in his. He looked down at her and found her looking to him, sadly smiling as she mouthed the words, "I love you". She always did this. At this particular moment, this gave him much strength, and for some reason the death of his parents did not affect him the way he thought it would; the way it should have (something was not quite right). Maybe it was his mind, warped after the confrontation with that thing he would never speak of again.

The funeral was ended.

Nearly three months later they were married. It was a joyous occasion. Garrion found himself enjoying the evening thoroughly as gifts were given and traditional advice given to them. He found himself laughing for the first time since . . . something was not right. Or rather everything was right. Though he did not know why, he could feel no remorse for his parents. His mind lingered on death most often, which depressed him greatly. But he could not pinpoint his sorrow. Somewhere, somehow they, were alright. He could not explain his mindset on this, but he knew it . . . he just knew.

Sylva tended him for the rest of his life with love and care. She often questioned him about what had happened; how he knew about his parent's death before seeing them. He never told her. He never told anyone. The authorities questioned him, hotly debating his role in the matter of his parents demise for years to come. But he would never be convicted of the crimes that some people cried out against him.

Comforting relatives and all his acquaintances mimicked the words of the priest

at the funeral, telling him his parents were at peace now. Before she had died his mother had warned him never to give in. That warning had saved his soul. The only thing that he lived for now, and that made life sweet, was his beloved Sylva whom he cherished and loved.

And yet for three years after, he found that depression was his constant companion. He tried to hide this as best he could, so as not to worry Sylva. But she saw through his pretense and often attempted to sway his mind into lighter paths.

Then, one day, she changed him for good when she confronted him about his "dark mood," as she labeled it. He politely debated that issue, telling her he would die for her, and he meant it. But he also used those words to avoid the issue, supposing that phrase would bring an end to the repeated discussion once and for all. But one day, Sylva, with a smirk stated flatly, "I do not wish for you to die for me. Instead, would you live for me, Garrion Bullrammer?" Her words struck him with a greater force than any foe ever had, or ever would (and there would be many in the future).

Knowing she cared gave him much strength to overcome the pain of his trial, and the sorrow which darkly plagued his mind thereafter. Her true love enabled him to gift her with the best possible life, and enjoy it himself to the end of his days.

From ages past, for ages to come,  
There will be souls Forsaken.

The shadow it reaches for someone,  
Unaware they have been taken.

In anticipation it waits and broods,  
Emotionlessly it will kill.

Allied with fear and blackest of moods,  
It seeks for lives to still.

## The Forsaken